

Hurd Comstock Residence II
Evanston
Cook County
Illinois

HABS No. ILL-1089

HABS
ILL,
16-EVAN,
3-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
Reduced Copies of Measured Drawings

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
801 - 19th Street N.W.
Washington, D.C.

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. ILL-1089

HURD COMSTOCK RESIDENCE II

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ILL,

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3-

Location: 1416 Church Street (I) and 1631 Ashland Avenue (II),
Evanston, Cook County, Illinois.

Present Owners
and Occupants: Comstock House I: Sigmund and Mildred Purwin,
1416 Church Street, Evanston, Illinois.

Comstock House II: Victor and Gladys Lebow,
1631 Ashland Avenue, Evanston, Illinois.

Present Use: Residences.

Statement of
Significance: This pair of houses done by Walter Burley Griffin
just before leaving the United States for Canberra,
is a sample of his handling of groups of buildings
whose stylistic characteristics were developed
along Wrightian lines.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: Legal description: the
far northern end of lot 20, measuring 125 feet 6 inches
along Ashland Avenue from the intersection with Church
Street, in Block 58 of the original village of Evanston,
in the south half of Section 13, Township 41, Range 13.

Chain of title, from the Chicago Title and Trust Company,
tract book 25-5, pages 43-45: The parcel laying at the
intersection of Church and Ashland Avenues, being 176 feet
long on the Church Street side and 125.5 feet long on the
Ashland Avenue side, was originally the property of Harvey
B. Hurd, and was recorded with his estate, March 30, 1906.
The entire parcel was deeded to Nellie H. Comstock; this
transaction was settled and recorded Sept. 4, 1909
(Document 4432377). The deed was then placed in trust
with William S. Young, Sept. 21, 1909 (Document 4440505),
but was never released to Nellie Comstock. On her death,
the property deed passed to Hurd Comstock on June 20,
1914 (Document 5446785).

North half of the lot: 176 feet by 63.5 feet, site of
Comstock House I: Hurd Comstock sold the north half of
the lot to Walter H. Munroe, July 25, 1925 (Document
8986505). After the death of her husband, Walter, Nan
Brower Munroe sold the property to Paul M. Ohnemus, March
12, 1929 (Document 10307711). Ohnemus sold the property

to Marion J. Slaughter, Feb. 21, 1930 (Document 10601116). The Slaughters sold the lot to Bertram Morris, July 1, 1940 (Document 12518698), who then sold it to John H. Wright, Sept. 12, 1947 (Document 14152063). Wright sold the lot to Sigmund F. Purwin and his wife, the present owners, Feb. 11, 1958 (Document 17144761).

South half of the lot: 160 feet by 62 feet along Ashland Avenue, site of Comstock House II: Hurd Comstock sold the south half of the parcel to Judith de Borig Gill, July 18, 1930 (Document 10722428). The Gills sold the lot to R. Hampton Ripley, Oct. 26, 1938 (Document 12229821). Ripley gave up the lot to Richard C. Johnston, April 16, 1941 (Document 12797488). Johnston split his interest in the lot between Ernest Doring, April 9, 1942 (Document 12881831) and John Sonneman, April 9, 1942 (Document 12881832). Doring sold his half interest to Sonneman on May 2, 1952 (Document 15335363). Sonneman sold the entire lot to Richard Jager, Oct. 29, 1952 (Document 15483730). Jager sold the lot to Sol L. Garfield, June 3, 1955 (Document 16259905). Garfield sold the lot to Victor Lebow and his wife, the present owners, on Sept. 30, 1957 (Document 17031584).

2. Date of erection: Designed in 1912, construction begun late in that year or very early in 1913. The houses were completed by April 5, 1913, when they were published in Construction News. The garage was finished later.

3. Architect: Walter Burley Griffin. The following is an outline of the major events of Mr. Griffin's life at the time of the design and construction of the Comstock houses:

- c. 1901-c. 1910--Worked in Frank Lloyd Wright's studio
- 1910--Griffin entered the Canberra competition
- 1911, June 29--Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Lucy Mahoney are married
- 1912, May 23--Griffin is notified that his entry has won the Canberra competition
- 1912, Summer (?)--the Comstock houses are designed
- 1913, March 12--construction is begun at Canberra
- 1913, April 5--Comstock houses are completed
- 1913, August--Griffin travels to Australia to settle construction and design disputes
- 1913, November--Griffin returns to the United States to settle his office affairs in Chicago
- 1914, June--Griffin returns to Australia.

4. Original plan and construction: James Birrell, Walter Burley Griffin (Brisbane: University of Queensland, 1964), an Australian, comments on the Comstock design:

"Elements of far reaching consequence which not only remained with Griffin throughout his life but also affected Australian architecture can be found in the Hurd Comstock houses. These houses were built on adjoining allotments at Evanston, Illinois. They were planned to complement each other in form and detail about a common garden. Their roof form....with raking overhanging gables and horizontal eaves, is the pattern which, through various houses Griffin built in Melbourne, became one of the startling points of modern (architecture in that area).... The diamond window under the gabled ridge of the Comstock houses was later taken over by Wright and developed not only in his kindergartens in Japan, but also...as late as 1950 in the Mossberg House, South Bend, Indiana. It also appears in the gable ends of the Ralph Griffin House and again and again in many of Griffin's incinerators in Australia. The textured walls and base of the two Comstock Houses became a favourite motif around Sydney and Melbourne." pp. 63-67.

These two dwellings were apparently a speculative venture for Mr. Comstock. House I, the larger of the two buildings was not built according to the ink on cloth drawing now in the possession of the Art Department, Northwestern University. In its final form the house more closely resembles a second, untitled, ink on cloth drawing also at Northwestern. This second drawing is of a single house and, due to the similarity to the finished building in Evanston, is probably some sort of revised plan for the Comstock House I.

B. Sources of Information:

1. Unpublished sources:

Brooks, H. Allen. The Prairie School. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Art Department, Northwestern University, 1957.

Drawings, ink on paper and cloth by Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahoney Griffin, now in the possession of the Art Department, Northwestern University.

2. Published sources:

Birrell, James. Walter Burley Griffin. Brisbane: University of Queensland, 1964.

Condit, Carl W. The Chicago School of Architecture. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964. p. 210, Figs. 177, 178.

Construction News, "Two Residences of Modern Design."
Vol. 35, April 5, 1913. pp. 6, 7.

Peisch, Mark L. The Chicago School of Architecture. New
York: Random House, 1964. pp. 60-61. Fig. 7, 8, 9.

Western Architect. Vol. 19, August 1913.

An extensive survey of Griffin's work. Many
photographs and drawings.

C. Supplemental Material:

"In his design of two houses for a Mr. Hurd Comstock at Evanston, Illinois, in 1912¹⁴, Griffin demonstrated his interest in obtaining maximum privacy on a comparatively narrow site. The corner site was divided into two lots, each measuring 60 feet by 140 feet (Fig. 7). The houses were separated by a sunken garden, which was to be used jointly by the residents of both houses. At the rear of the lot a double garage was screened from view by a hedge of trees and shrubs (Fig. 8). Throughout the plan Griffin pays careful attention to economical construction. The buildings are of the same general construction Shingled roofs and frame and stucco exteriors give these houses a similar appearance, yet in plan they are differentiated by conforming to their respective positions on the plot. The corner house, House A (Fig. 9), of more extensive proportions, faces Church Street, a busy thoroughfare. The neighboring house looks out on Ashland Avenue, a more secluded road. Griffin, therefore, placed a spacious veranda on the sheltered, garden side of House A, giving its occupants silence and privacy from the busy street. The neighboring House B, on the other hand, has veranda and living room facing the less congested Ashland Avenue. The massive pylons that Griffin had used earlier in the Emery House are again salient features, especially of the corner dwelling. They give a dramatic firmness to the design. As in many designs by the Chicago School, the pitched roofs with their boldly projecting eaves are used to unify the design, rather than as protection against the sun. The corner house shows Griffin attempting an economical use of space. Instead of connecting the main rooms with hallways, he used different levels connected by short flights of stairs, a design feature he had used in a more prominent way in the Emery House, and which was to become a part of the contemporary architectural idiom. The large story-and-one-half living room, a particularly attractive feature of this house, is reached by

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"Two Residences of Modern Design," Construction News, XXXV (April 5, 1913), pp. 6-7.

a flight of stairs between hall and living room, thus eliminating wasteful separate hallways. In the neighboring house, Griffin kept his rooms on one level in a more open relationship to each other. The principle rooms of this house pivot around a large fireplace in the Wrightian manner. Dining room, living room, and veranda are all treated as a single unit with only french doors separating the veranda from the living room. Open-air sleeping porches on the second story of each house are a further example of Griffin's interest in open plans.... (The) interest in modular design, seen for the first time in the Comstock Houses, is characteristic of much of Griffin's later work. At first sight these houses, because of their pitched roofs, seem more traditional than they are. At second sight the complexity of spatial organization, compactness of plan, and variety of elements become quite apparent. An important feature from the point of view of planning is the relationship of the houses to each other, combining a common site and joint facilities with individual privacy. This is a problem every architect of suburban houses had to face more and more frequently. Griffin's solutions were arrived at independently, without precedent in Wright's work... /and are/ a milestone in the domestic architecture of the Chicago School." /Mark L. Peisch, The Chicago School of Architecture (New York: Random House, 1964), pp. 60-61/.

Prepared by Leland M. Roth
Historian
National Park Service
Summer 1967

PART II: ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: An example of Prairie School architectural principles applied to the design of a suburban house of about 2,000 square feet and to the planning of its site.
2. Condition of fabric: In general, good; however, the porch has settled about six inches at its west wall and all of the cantilevered level eaves have sagged noticeably.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Rectangular; 51'-3" x 31'-0"; two stories.
2. Foundations: Concrete. The exterior face above grade is battered and is carried to a height of two feet above the first floor, which is in turn about two feet above grade.

3. Wall construction: The walls above the raised foundation wall are of wood frame construction. Both the foundation wall and the wood frame wall above it are finished in a very heavily textured stucco, which is painted an off-white.
4. Structural system, framing: The second floor above the entrance hall, living room and dining room is framed with beams at approximately 3'-4" on centers. The beams are exposed. The framing otherwise is typical balloon framing.
5. Porches and stoops: The first floor porch is screened and connects with the living room by means of three glazed doors. The present owners use the porch often in summer as an outdoor living space. The stoop at the main entrance door is of concrete. A cantilevered roof protects the entrance to the house. The second floor porch is open.
6. Chimney: Brick, serving fireplace and furnace.
7. Openings: The exterior doors and windows are laid out on a 3'-4" plan module. The windows are grouped and their mullion trim, its exterior face flush with that of the stucco, is in many places extended vertically to divide the stucco wall surface into panels. The windows and the exterior doors have wooden stiles and rails, and glazing is clear glass held in place with wooden stops of rectangular cross section. On the second floor the window muntins form a distinctive pattern involving some diagonals. The muntins are wood, also with wooden stops. Sash, stiles, rails, and muntins are heavier than generally found and, along with the trim and the door stiles and rails, have rough-sawn exposed exterior surfaces that are stained a dark brown color. The sash are casements, butt hinged to swing outward. The insect screens and storm sash are of conventional weight and design and are installed on the interior of the house. They are top hinged and may be interchanged by removing and replacing the hinge pins.
8. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: The roofs are gabled, sloping 6-1/2 in 12, were originally roofed with wood shingles, as can be seen in the attic, and are now covered by composition shingles. At the three gables the barge boards are not parallel to the end walls of the building, but are angled to them so that the roof overhangs these walls at the ridge much more than at the eaves.

- b. Eaves: The eaves are in effect a cantilevered strip of level roof covered with built-up roofing. Eave fascias and gable barge boards are of wood with a rough-sawn exposed surface stained to match the rest of the exterior trim. All soffits are stuccoed to match the walls.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. First floor plan: The entrance hall, living room, and dining room follow the open plan of the prairie house. A narrow dropped ceiling plane serving to provide indirect lighting also defines the places where living and dining room, and where living room and entrance hall merge. At the west and east corner windows of the dining room a cabinet has been built in the extra plan module enclosed at each place. Deep drawers are provided below window sill height; and above, a cabinet formed by one wall, two windows, and a third sash giving access from the room itself. This box of light has a glass shelf and is used by the present owners of the house for the display of china.

The kitchen is small. An early drawing of the house (the original of which is at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois) shows a kitchen planned in a "U" according to principles still considered good. The original kitchen cabinet work has been replaced. A small lavatory has been added by taking space from the corner of what was originally the maid's room, and the rest of the maid's room has been remodeled to serve as an office.

- b. Second floor plan: Four bedrooms and a bathroom are arranged along an "L" shaped hallway. A hinged and counterweight staircase in the hallway ceiling provides access to the attic. The ceiling in the west (master) bedroom follows the slope of the roof, allowing the windows to rise on the west wall to the ceiling line. These windows also connect this bedroom with a small porch cut from a portion of the volume of the porch roof below.
- 2. Stairway: The stairway is centrally placed and functions as a design element of the open-planned first floor.
 - 3. Flooring: Hardwood, in general. Resilient flooring has been installed in the dining room and is present in the kitchen.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: Sand-finished plaster has been used, and it is painted a creamy white in the principal rooms. The exposed beams of the living room, entrance hall, and dining room are boxed with finished boards of hardwood stained a dark reddish brown. This wood appears to be gum.
5. Doorways and doors: Door trim is rectangular in cross section. Doors are single paneled, and the panel is joined to the stiles and rails by moldings with pane surfaces only. Trim and doors in general are the same hardwood as the finished wood of the exposed beams.
6. Decorative features and trim: Trim is made up of flat members of rectangular cross section. A four inch high horizontal member is continuous on the walls and is placed at a uniform height, that of door and window heads and of the dropped ceiling plane that provides indirect lighting in the principal spaces. The trim at window jambs runs from window head to the baseboard of the room, although most windows are not of floor length. The fireplace and the chimney are of hard-surfaced yellow brick with a concrete mantelpiece and built-in concrete andirons. The mantelpiece is now painted black, but the andirons are unpainted. The brick of the chimney is exposed on all sides.
7. Hardware: A bronze window operator at ground-floor sash allows one to open the casements without opening the insect-screens.
8. Lighting: Indirect lighting, as described under first floor plan.
9. Heating: The house is centrally heated with a system of hot water radiators. Ventilation through an opening in the wall below the first floor landing of the stairway allows warm air to rise from the cellar to heat the entrance hall. Small openings high on the east wall of the master bedroom allow the air to pass from the upper portion of this room across into the attic and out through the attic windows in the east wall.

D. Site and Surroundings:

1. General setting and orientation: The front of the house faces Ashland Avenue to the west, and the porch is on this side of the house. The house has been located close to the southern boundary of the site. Hurd Comstock House I to the north, has been placed close to the north boundary of its site, thus allowing a maximum of open space between

the two Comstock Houses. The previously mentioned drawing at Northwestern University shows a site plan for these houses in which both appear to share a sunken garden located in the open space thus created between them.

The site is suburban residential in character with single family houses of comparable size in the vicinity, and of comparable age. In general neither the houses nor the gardens are well maintained.

2. Outbuildings: A two-car garage is placed almost directly in back of the house and at the rear of the lot next to the public alley from which the automobiles enter.
3. Landscaping: Concrete paving and a raised planting bed in an L-shape around the northwest corner of the house, benches, and a fence dividing the lot of this Comstock house from that of the other--all are recent additions probably dating from the 1950's. There is no evidence of the sunken garden shown on the early drawings, although a planting plan at the Burnham Library, Chicago, (Micro-film Roll 8, Frame 35) shows that its design was at least carried out that far.

Prepared by Wesley Shank
Supervisory Architect
National Park Service
July 1967

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The records of this structure were made during the 1967 Chicago IV Project. This was the fourth in a series of summer projects designed to record the significant architecture of the Chicago area. The project was sponsored by the late Mr. Earl J. Reed, FAIA. He was assisted by John R. Fugard, FAIA, Treasurer, and Miss Agnes E. Hodges of the Chicago Chapter Foundation, and a Selection Committee consisting of James Arkin, AIA; Ruth Schoneman, Art Institute of Chicago; and J. Carson Webster, Northwestern University. Organizations cooperating with HABS in this project were: The Chicago Chapter of the American Institute of Architects; the Chicago Chapter Foundation; the Chicago Community Trust; the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies; the Illinois Arts Council; and the Chicago Heritage Committee. The Council also made funds available for a Statewide Inventory Project with out-of-Chicago architects cooperating. Quarters were provided at Glessner House through the Chicago School of Architecture Foundation.

Mr. James C. Massey, Chief, Historic American Buildings Survey, was in over-all charge of HABS summer programs. The Project Supervisor was Wesley Shank, Iowa State University. Other members of the summer team were: Historian, Leland Roth, University of Illinois, Urbana; Photographer, Philip Turner; Secretary, Mrs. Burt Schloss; and Student Assistant Architects: Keleal Hassin, Tulane University; Maurice Griffin, Illinois Institute of Technology; Allan Steenhusen and David Vyverberg, Iowa State University.